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ABSTRACT

Although the black poet Melvin B. Tolson is recognized and respected by other poets and critics, he is unknown both to students and to the general reading public. This paper points out that the key to understanding Tolson's poetry, and much of the poetry coming out of black America, is his use of language. The paper examines one of Tolson's major works, "Harlem Gallery," as a way of introducing Tolson to a wider audience. The brief summary of the poem and a detailed examination of its language and imagery in the context of black street-language games reveal that Tolson's creativity is a fusion of Western thought, white ideals, and black idiom. His work is a synthesis of history, culture, personality, soil, time, and integrity. (BL)

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William W. Cook

December, 1976

Slang and colloquial speech have rarely been so creative. It is as if the common man (or his anonymous spokesman) would in his speech assert his humanity against the powers that be, as if the rejection and revolt subdued in the political sphere would out in a vocabulary.

H. Marcuse, One Dimensional Man

THE MOUTH'S THE MESSAGE: LANGUAGE IN MELVIN TOLSON'S HARLEM GALLERY

The English language befriends the grand American expression...it is brawny enough and limber and full enough...It is the powerful language of resistance... It is the dialect of common sense.

W. Whitman, Preface of 1855 Leaves of Grass

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The street is where young bloods get their education. I learned how to talk in the street, not from reading Dick and Jane, going to the zoo and all that simple shit. The teacher would test our vocabulary each week, but we knew the vocabulary we needed. They'd give us arithemetic to exercise our minds. Hell, we exercised our minds by playing the dozens....If anybody needed to study poetry, she needed to study mine.

H. "Rap" Brown

I'm a black poet, an African-American poet, a Negro poet. I'm no accident -- and I don't give a tinker's damn what you think.

Melvin B. Tolson

> Tolson has been almost entirely ignored. At sixty-five, he has won few honors, received attention from only a handful of critics and poets; and yet Harlem Gallery like his earlier Libretto For The Republic of Liberia, marks him as one of America's greatest poets...Sufficient to say that whatever his reputation in the present critical climate, Tolson stands firmly as a great American poet.
>
> Robert Donald Spector

Joy Flasch's Melvin Tolson, the first attempt to study that poet's art, was published in 1972 and since than, it has remained the only detailed critical assessment of the poet Robert D. Spector called a "great American poet". Eugene B. Redmond's Drumvoices published this year provides another kind of tool to the Tolson enthusiast. Redmond in his approximately thirty references to this "complex, almost anomalous poet" places him within the stream of Afro-American poetry and provides a context for interpreting Tolson which Randall in his much briefer treatment in The Black Aesthetic only hints at. Redmond's book, the first treatment of Black poetry from its beginnings in the United States to the early sevanties, is unlike other treatments by Black critics in one important respect: Redmond's admiration for Tolson's poetry is unequivocal. The reader who seeks more aid than that listed above will be sorely disappointed. Tolson is represented in the major anthologies of Afro-American poetry but in spite of repeated statements by major figures of the American poetry establishment that he belongs in the company of Eliot, Pound and Crane, he appears not at all in some of the major anthologies that purport to be collections of American poetry (See Allen's The New American Poetry, Untermeyer's Fifty Modern American and British Poets, Sanders, Nelson and Rosenthal's Chief Modern Poets of England and America) or mangled beyond recognition (see Oscar Williams' Pocketbook of Modern Verse). He fares no better when one considers major critical works. Neither Hyatt Waggoner in his study of American Poetry From the Puritans to The Present or Roy Harvey Pearce in The Continuity of American Poetry mentions Tolson. David Perkins' A History of Modern Poetry just published this year dismisses Tolson in one sentence.

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This is the critical situation at present. In his essay "The Decolonization of American Literature" (Black World, October, 1965) Karl Shapiro offers one explanation of this lack of attention.

> He has a superb reputation among poets and critics but is unknown to students and to the general reading public. This is not because he is difficult to read (which he is), for difficulty of text is the stock-in-trade of the poetry-teaching profession. Tolson is not read because he is a Negro. A blind spot in the white literary eye will not recognize a great Negro poet. The white professional mind thinks that poetry is written by Englishmen or their descendants and imitators. [2]

The emphasis in the above passage is Shapiro's and if he had stopped at this point, I might argue that he is oversimplifying. But he goes on to qualify what he means by the accusation.

> The refusal to see that Tolson's significance lies in his language, Negro and that only that language can express the sensibility of the Negro at the door of freedom, is a final desparate maneuver to contain the Negro within the traditional culture. And for that it is too late, the Tradition is already antebellum.[3]

Shapiro is not alone in his assessment of language as the key to an understanding of Tolson's poetry and of much of the poetry coming out of Black America. This can be understood in part if one realizes that the last great upsurge of poetic activity in Afro-American communities (a movement misnamed The Harlem Renaissance) was a period dominated by poets who went for their materials to their own experience as Black men in America but stayed within the prescribed limits of Anglo-American poetry stylistically. With a few notable exceptions (Hughes among them) they failed to tap the rich vein of Black speech. James Weldon Johnson's introduction to the 1922 edition of The Book of Negro Poetry dismisses "dialect" as a possible language for serious poetry and Tolson in his review of Claude McKay's Selected Poems sees this as a missed opportunity.

> McKay like his contemporaries of the Negro Renaissance was unaffected by the New Poetry and Criticism. The logic of facts proves Mr. Tate's observation that this literary ghetto-ism "too often limited the Negro poet to a provincial mediocrity," from which he is just now escaping...McKay's radicalism was in content - not in form: the grammar of the Souls of Black Folk demanded the seven league boots of the "huge moor." [4]

Tolson was not content to "pour new wine of content into old bottles of form "; his new sensibility needed a commensurate form and the sources of that form were the street games and folk utterances of Black America.

In his review of Tolson's first book Rendezvous With America, William Rose Benet expresses the view that has been held consistently by those who have read Tolson: Tolson is fascinated by and playing with language in a way no American poet has done before.

> Sometimes Mr. Tolson uses words more for the love of their sound than for their aptitude...I have long thought that the Negro has a special delight in the sound, shape and color of words that most white people lack. In the past their caress upon the language, whose meaning was only partially understood, may have been food for humor. There is a great deal more to it than that. They furbish and freshen words, the best of them, whether artlessly or, as here, with art; they polish them till the poetry flows from them. [5]

Allen Tate in his introduction to Tolson's second published volumne of poetry speaks of Tolson as having "a great gift of language, a profound historical sense and a first-rate intelligence." Tolson, according to Tate, is the first Afro-American poet to assimilate the language of the Anglo-American tradition. Unlike other Afro-American poets, he is not hampered by a belief that his peculiar genius lies in the "folk" idiom or in the romantic notion that he can create a new langauage within the English language. (Just how far Tate is from the truth will be seen in the discussion of language which follows this survey of critical opinion.) Almost two decades later, Karl Shapiro in his introduction to Harlem Gallery writes: "He writes in Negro, a possible American language." In an article on Tolson which appeared in the Bookweek section of The N.Y. Herald Tribune he adds that Tolson "instead of purifying the language which is the business of the academy" is "complicating it, giving it the gift of tongues." Tolson, according to Shapiro, is unique in this respect. "It is not enough to equate Tolson, as his best critics have done, with Eliot and Crane, the Cantos or Anabase. To make him equal is to miss the point, just as it would be to make him better than. Tolson writes and thinks in Negro." [6] Robert Donald Spector while he agrees that Tolson has been neglected indicates that the reasons for the neglect may be that Tolson is a "poet whose language, comprehensiveness and values demand a critical sensitivity rarely found in any establishment." The way in which Tolson "plays adroitly with language" requires, according to Spector, pages of demonstration. [7] John Ciardi like all the others, is struck

by the force of language and rhythm in the poem. It is "as breathtaking as anything in the range of American poetry. This is obviously a book to return to. The blast of language and vision is simply too overwhelming for first judgments." 8

Lest the reader be deceived by the opinions quoted above, it should be made clear that critical opinion of Tolson's language has not been consistently positive. Many critics have taken issue with the assertion that Tolson writes in Negro. Sarah Webster Fabio, writing in Black World, denies the accuracy of Shapiro's statment. "His identification of Tolson's language as being authentically Negro is a gross inaccuracy..Melvin Tolson's language is most certainly not Negro to any significant degree. The weight of that vast, bizarre, pseudo-literary diction is to be placed back into the American mainstream where it rightfully and wrongmindedly belongs."9 Paul Bremen is even more negative in his criticism.

> More recent and spectacular is the case of the late Melvin Beaunorus Tolson, of whom Karl Shapiro said that he "writes in Negro", a true word, of which Shapiro never seems to have fathomed the true meaning: that Tolson postured for a white audience, and with an ill-concealed grin and a wicked sense of humor gave it just what it wanted: an entertaining darky using almost comically big words as the best wasp tradition demanded of its educated house-niggers.10

Laurence Leiberman in his Hudson Review article on Harlem Gallery states that though the students he teaches are black and though they come from all parts of the world, they cannot understand Harlem Gallery. Hoyt Fuller dimissed the work as "a perfectly silly piece of ranting" while Dudley Randall after listing all the New Critical characteristics of the work concludes that "the learned allusive language is not the spontaneous speech of the Negro people."11

Two critics - Jack Richardson and the anonymous Times Literary Supplement reviewer of Harlem Gallery - offer a way out of this dead-end. To neither of them is the language of the work either an assimilation of the traditions of the Anglo-American establishment or the spontaneous speech of the Negro people. The work of Tolson marks the end of the sense of Negro culture as hermetically sealed. Richardson sees Tolson, Ellison and Wright as having set standards from which

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any writer can learn. "It demonstrates a virtuosity at meeting standards of intelligence and craft that has little to do with notions of a hermetic folk culture." The Afro-America of Melvin Tolson is no subculture of simple parables and folktales.[12] The Times review noting the academic love of displayed literary and mythical erudition, the linguistic complexity and involuted metaphor concludes that "In one sense the artificially created idiom is itself the poem's theme: the nature of Negro art in a white culture."[13]

Are we concerned then not with Negro language per se but with a language which while it may include the speech of Afro-Americans is something else in addition? A clue to Tolson's aims in Harlem Gallery may be found in his own statements about the Afro-American and Afro-American art.

> A freebooter of lands and seas,
> He plunders the dialects of the marketplace,
> Thieves lexicons of crown jewel discoveries,
> Pillages the symbols and meccas of the race:
> Of thefts the poet's magic leaves no trace.
>
> Tolson, "The Poet"

In an interview with M. W. King which first appeared in print in Herbert Hill's Anger and Beyond, Tolson responded to the statement that he like the Metaphysical poets and French Symbolistes delighted in figures of speech -especially the metaphor. His response is vital to this discussion.

> I would add another group to the Metaphysicals and the symbolists: the Negro people. Remember Karl Shapiro's words in his introduction to Harlem Gallery: "Tolson writes in Negro." I am no soothsayer talking to Virgil's Aeneas, before his descent into the lower world of the Black Ghetto; however, I hazard that Shapiro has pillaged my three books and discovered that I, as a Black poet, have absorbed the Great Ideas of the Great White World, and interpreted them in the melting-pot idiom of my people. My roots are in Africa, Europe, and America.[14]

The tripartite origin which he claims here is only one of many trinities which appear in Tolson's speech and his poetry. He defines a person as tridimensional- biological, sociological and psychological. The central themes of all art are - soil, time and integrity. He must write not in one mode but in the high, middle and low modes. His technique consists of "sight, sound and sense which he calls the S-Trinity of Parnassus."[15]

Harlem Gallery does not submit to simple classification. It is a fourth

magnitude poeem which involves many characters in a number of scenes. It examines history and culture. It reviews personalities who have been instrumental in shaping the life of its creator as well as those works of literature and science which have influenced him. It is on one level a biography of its artist-creator (the cross street/where/curator and creator/meet pg. 170) and the history of his people (a people's dusk of dawn pg. 19). It is above all an attempt to synthesize the many influences which make the Afro-American artist. This attempt at synthesis is made like that of other writers of "American Epics" - Whitman, Pound, Crane, Williams, Berryman and Ginsberg - through language. The artist, aware of the specialness of his quest must find a language which will describe that quest. Old models will not do.

Like the protagonist in Ellison's Invisible Man;* WHo believed that he would find relief if "all the contradictory voices shouting inside my head would calm down and sing a song in unison, whatever it was I wouldn't care as long as they sang without dissonance; yes, and avoided the uncertain extremes of the scale"[16] Tolson turns to music for the metaphor most appropriate to his dilemna. Like that character he could not depand on a racial or biological definition of self. He could not let himself slide into a ready-made culture. He had to create the authentic self through language and having done this to proceed to the task of creating a race and a culture. The irony of all this is that having completed the first task, he will have also completed the second.

> We create the race by creating ourselves and then to our astonishment we will have created something far more important: we will have created a culture. Why waste time creating a conscience for something that doesn't exist? [17]

To continue the parallel with Ellison's novel, he must try all the voices that are a part of his background and heritage and finally arrive at one authentic voice which though different from all the discordant sounds within him is yet composed of them. How do we mate the language of Africa, Europe and America?

*The parallels between the two works cannot be overstressed. Both are Afro-American Odysseys, deny a narrow definition of Blackness, refuse to repudiate Anglo and Euro-American ties, focus on the fould poetry of the Black community, are studded with symbols of color, music and folklore and mythology, etc. etc.

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The central figures in Harlem Gallery can be read as personifications of the three part heritage which Tolson is attempting to depict and unify - the curator has the culture of Europe, Doctor Nkomo represents the enigmatic and epigrammatic wisdom of Africa and Hideho Heights is the street poet of Harlem. Through the interraction of these three and its reflection in the language of the twenty-four books of Harlem Gallery, we can follow Tolson's struggle toward unity.

As was stated earlier, Harlem Gallery is a fourth magnitude poem which uses both dramatic and discursive narrative methods to achieve its effect. Some examination of the route it traveled before it reached the state in which it was published may cast light on the reasons for its final form. That examination will take us back thirty-five years before the publication of the poem to Tolson's Master's thesis. His topic was the Harlem Renaissance and his three objectives were (1) to show the social background of the Harlem Renaissance and the various forces in the Black metropolis which caused the artistic and literary development of the "New Negro"; (2) to review the lives and works of leading contemporary Black essayists, short story writers, novelists and poets in the light of modern criticism and (3) to interpret the attitudes and stylistic methods discovered in the Harlem Renaissance. Out of this study came not only the Master's paper, but also a sonnet on the Renaissance and then a 344 page book titled A Gallery of Harlem Portraits. This last work was sent to both Maxwell Perkins and Bennet Cerf in 1939 and rejected as unsaleable. The work was put away and finally in 1965 Harlem Gallery was born of the mating of the old work and its imagist, Whitmanian and Spoon River Anthology influences with Tolson's reading of Eliot, Pound, Yeats, Baudelaire, Pasternak and "All the great moderns"[18]
Still other influences are apparent in the final work - Tolson's love for the joke and his wry sense of humor are given full sway; his fondness for collecting not only African proverbs but also allusions and quotations helped shape the new work;

I like to go about places, hobnob with people, gather rich epithets and

> proverbs in churches and taverns, in cotton fields and dance halls, in streets and toilets. The rhythms exorcise white magic. The man in the ears is my jack-in-the-box.[19]

That Tolson was a debate and drama teacher and coach is amply illustrated in his poem. His characters revel in forensic combat; he presents us with little playlets and theater language and direction throughout the Gallery.

The final structure of the work, like that of other works of its magnitude is that of a journey. If as Pound states, the epic is a poem which includes history, it is also a song of the self, a record of the poet's quest for self which on a larger scale can be read as that of the country or the race.

> Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?[20]

This is especially important when one realizes that Harlem Gallery as we know it is only part one of the five part work Tolson had in mind. Other sections were to be titled Egypt Land, The Red Sea, The Wilderness and The Promised Land. In this journeying toward self, the inscape is language as Williams states over and over in Paterson for the poet is travelling through uncharted territory and he has no precedent in language to aid him in describing the terrain.

> There was no thing to find but the names of things,
> Set down that we might call them by those names
> And walk without fear among things known.[21]

In helping a reader follow the journey, it may be wise to suggest a few signposts on the route. The twenty-four books of the Harlem Gallery have been grouped for convenience by Flasch in her work and these groupings are useful to anyone approaching the complexity of the work for the first time.

The first five books (Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta and Epsilon) center on the curator and pose the questions which will be dealt with in the remaining books: what is the Afro-American artist? What is art? Who is the Afro-American?

> The I'ness of my humaness and Negroness. Pg. 20

Must the artist cater to a particular racial, political or social group? Can he combine low, middle and high? The second group consisting of Zeta, Eta, Theta and Iota, introduce Dr. Nkoma the African sage, John Laugart the artist who refuses to violate his integrity and the socially and culturally varied visitors

to the Harlem Gallery. The presentation in this section is dramatic except for the short Theta section which returns to the discursive method of the first five sections. The third grouping - Kappa, Lambda, Mu, Nu and Xi - introduces us to the low-life of Harlem and the vagabond poet Hideho Heights. The setting here is Aunt Grindle's Elite Chitterling Shop and the Zulu Club and the focus is on soul food, music, poetry and folk lore. The next section consisting of Omicron, and Pi return to discussions of art and the artist. The major theme here is the pressure that is put on the artist in an attempt to make him conform to a particular group's preconceived notions of art and the resultant necessity for the artist to resist this pressure and preserve his integrity. Rho, Sigma, Tau and Upsilon form the fifth division. Mister Starks, an artist who would not resist the public pressure to do what was popular and commercial has left a series of biographies of Harlemites which are unlike the work which the public has seen. In this section we read these biographies and see the major figures of the poem through the eyes of Mister Starks. Phi, Chi, Psi and Omega conclude the work by revealing the double nature of the art of Hideho Heights.

> The bifacial nature of his poetry!
> The racial ballad in the public domain
> And the private poem in the modern vein. Pg. 145

He writes not only in the "low" vein of the streets, but also in the "high" vein of the regents of the Harlem Gallery. In these sections, Tolson, fully aware that he has offended both black and white readers concludes that he is determined to follow his own course. He addresses both "black boy" and "white boy" telling them that it is the obligation of the artist to take the heritage of the Renaissance and to build on it a body of modern poems.

> Black boy, O Black Boy
> Is the port worth the cruise?

He has no assurance of success or acceptance, but soil, time and integrity are the trinity he must worship for they and they alone will bring him safely home.

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Metaphors and Symbols in spirituals and blues
Have always been the Negro's manna in the Great White World.

Black Boy often adds
the dimension of ethnic irony
to Empson's classic seven. [22]

Having completed this brief summary of the plot of the poem, a kind of frame for the picture which Tolson paints, we turn to the language details of that large canvas. If as has been argued, language and particularly integration of "languages" with a resultant creation of a "new" language is the distinguishing feature of Harlem Gallery, we need to understand what this integration is and the nature of the elements which are a part of it. One general statement will serve as guide: Tolson uses Black street language and its methodology as the crucible into which he pours all the experiences of his art and life. We see the dozens remade by the incorporation of materials from "high" art and as a consequence, that material is made different by its presence within the structure of the dozens.

Black street language games like all language structures serve a number of functions other than that of communicating information. The importance of learning how to play them well is attested to by the presence in autobiographical works by Afro-American authors of their experiences with the games. H. "Rap" Brown devotes a number of pages of Die, Nigger, Die to playing the dozens and signifying. Melvin Van Peebles spends one entire chapter of A Bear For the F.B.I. explaining how he came to become a player. Claude Brown's Manchild in The Promised Land is a manual on soul talk, the murphy game and running a game on another person. Ellison's protagonist triumphs over his opponents by putting them into the dozens. And no writer other than Tolson has been as brilliant in the incorporation of these games into his work as has been Ishmael Reed.

The games may be classified under three headings. The first of these are the defensive strategies. To shuck and jive is to try to talk your way out of an unpleasant or dangerous situation by pleading ignorance, denying your actual motives; exaggerating the strength and wisdom of your opponent and your own weakness. To cop a plea is to beg for mercy by again appealing to the vanity of your

opponent. Surely he has more important things to do than to fool with you. Hyperbolic descriptions of the pain and hardship his retribution will bring to you are vital here. To pull someone's coat or open his nose is to inform the naive or the newcomer of the actual situation in which he is operating. The more metaphoric and basic the description the better.

> All it takes to get along in this man's world is a little
> shit, grit and mother wit. And baby we was born with all three.
> Man let me pull your coat about this work hype.

The monika or boast involves hyperbolic descriptions of one's power - the establishment of a "rep". This is done by describing the hardships one has survived or the great deeds one has performed.

> I can play any game that you can name
> For any amount that you can count.
>
> I was born in Rat Alley
> I live on Fox Avenue.
> I shall die on Buzzard Street. Pg. 128

Sounding, an offensive strategy, is the reverse of the monika. Using the same techniques, the player does not build up his own "rep"; rather, he destroys his opponent.

> Consider the abortions
> of the howl-howl-with-the-combo quacks
> the little Eddie Jests and Shortfellows who use no rubbers
> when copulating with
> muses on the wrong side of the tracks. Pg. 144

The most popular offensive game is called the dozens. In its purest form, this is a game of insult in which the dozens player comments in rhyming couplets on the sexual looseness, ugliness, poverty, stupidity and general undesireability of his opponent's female relatives and of the opponent himself. A favorite target is that trinity - vagina, breasts and buttocks.

> In the bible belt of the pale phallus and the chalk clitoris

Signifying is a more indirect form of insult than the dozens. Here one does not comment directly but rather states "I heard", "Somebody told me" or he poses the insult in the form of an "innocent" question. The number of "toasts" about the signifying monkey attest to the popularity of this strategy.

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In addition to the defensive and offensive strategies listed above, there are a third group of folk language strategies which may be classified as methods of projecting the self and sharing the myths and experiences of the people. The folk tale and proverb are with Afro-American people, as they are with all other people, the often cryptic and enigmatic repositories of the group experience and as such they are tools for teaching and communicating that experience. In them we see some indication of the world view of the people from whom they spring. The ballad and toast celebrate the lives of the heroes of the race but in performing them accuracy of plot and event are not nearly as important as the virtuosity of the performer. While ballads focus on strong men and their tragedies and triumphs, the toast is most often concerned with trickster figures and "bad niggers". The toast in which the speaker does not worry the line with a virtuoso stringing together of obscenities or include at least one very graphic description of superhuman sexual prowess is sure to be dismissed as lame. One final language game must be mentioned in preparation for Harlem Gallery: Fine talk or broad talk. This form of playing is marked by elegance of expression and complex words - the more latinate and Greek the better. Anything worth saying is worth saying in the most complicated manner possible; with as many quotations and allusions as possible; with as many double entendres as the fertile brain can conjure up. The goal here is not only to entertain the listener but also to close out non-members and to impress members with the skill and inventiveness of the speaker. Many white writers and Black critics of this game presuppose that the speaker is unaware of his malapropisms, flaws in diction, etc. and hence the amused parodies by white writers and the embarrassment of the members of the black bourgeoisie.

A skillful player of these games is that person with a fertile imagination, a fund of sexual and scatalogical images and a genius for rhyme and hyperbole. The games are marked by virtuoso naming and enumerating, free rhyming, jazzy rhymthmic effects, hyperbolic imagery, double entendre, far reaching comparisons, alliteration, punning, plays on words, compressed and cryptic imagery and

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A skillful player of these games is that person with a fertile imagination, a fund of sexual and scatalogical images and a genius for rhyme and hyperbole. The games are marked by virtuoso naming and enumerating, free rhyming, jazzy rhythmic effects, hyperbolic imagery, double entendre, far reaching comparisons, alliteration, punning, plays on words, compressed and cryptic imagery and

worrying the line. This last technique, borrowed from melismatic singing and instrumentation is a technique of breaking up a word or phrase in order to interject commentary. Talking blues and spirituals like "Po' Mourner's Got a Home at Last" are examples of worrying the line.

Other char acteristics which are important to our discussion of Tolson incldde brutal frankness in statement, obscenity of image and language, transferring words from one part of speech to another and using names of persons as verbs describing actions associated with those persons - "to bogart" is to present a cool, imperturbable front in the face of danger; "to profile" is to pose in such a way that one's good looks and clothings are clearly discernable.

A final source, one suggested by the critical comment and discussed in detail by Stephen Henderson is black music. This may take the form of suggesting song titles in casual general references, careful allusions to songs, quotations from song lyrics, imitation of song forms, forcing the reader to incorporate the memory of a song or passage or even the delivery technique of a particular performer, use of musical notation, requiring the reader to incorporate his emotional response to a particular song in his reading of the poem, using the musician himself as subject, use of hipster speech and construction of the poem as score or chart to be performed by the reader.[22] The influence of music will be seen as we discuss the poem but it should be noted here that the very organization of The Libretto For Liberia is the solfeggio (do to do) and "Dark Symphony" is organized according to the movements of a symphony.

Note how these techniques come together in the following passages from the poem.

> The curator
> stood out
> in the
> Death's Jest-Book of Harlem like
> the Minerva with the Police Gazette Belt
> catching a twenty-four
> pound, round
> solid missile fired from a cannon
> thirty feet away. Pg. 120

When a reader realized that the allusion is to Wonder Woman, he cannot help but chuckle in amusement and admiration.

Cook 11/76

Thou art not the first bridegroom disillusioned by
the darling materialism of the westering star.
she butterflied the bowels of Walt Whitman.
Bedded in the Democratic Vista Inn,
the good Gray Poet discovered
the materialism of the West was a steatopygous Jezebel
with falsies on her buttocks. Pg. 118

The description is coarse but it is also elevated and even scholarly in tone.

I remember, oh, I remember how
irony trumped his coat card.

The entire Harlem Gallery sequence can be seen as one extended sound on Gertrude Stein for her comment that the Negro suffers from nothingness. Tolson refutes her not only by offering Black America to the reader in all its richness, but also by putting her in the dozens. How is this done?

In the first book of Harlem Gallery references are made by the narrator to well known Black works which with the addition of other works by Hardy, Eliot, Frazier, Pound and Cullen will form a kind of running motif in the work. Dubois' Dusk of Dawn an autobiographical study of aman who grew up in East Barrington, Massachusetts and earned a Harvard Ph.D and Wright's Black Boy the autobiography of a man who having migrated from the deep south suffered all the horrors of racism are two opposing extremes which must be united. In this same section we are presented the pepper bird, Africa's alarm clock, and the clock bird of America. After setting up the seemingly unreconcilable opposites, the section closes with a union of opposites. "Where the plain is twilled and the twilled is plain."

The Beta section opens with an excellent example of worrying the line.

O Tempora
What is man?
(Pull down the ladder of sophistry!)
O Mores,
what manner of man is this?
(Guy the ologists in effigy!) 21

Into the basic line - O Tempora! O Mores!- we inject biblical references, create a verb from the name of Guy Fawkes and rework a line from Pound's Canto LXXXI. Further into the section we find references to the song"Under the Bamboo Tree", punning "who knows without no", plays on

words "headspin of a Ph. D." and reworkings of familiar passages - "Go to the ant thou sluggard" becomes "go the the ant's synechdoche." And finally, just as we are to see later in the wine metaphor of the Psi section, elevation above the mundane is expressed in the idea that "the higher altitudes produce the better teas" even though the climber is frustrated by the fact that the upper rungs of his ladder are zeroes. The section closes with a proverb about the reshaping of language by the artists of each decade.

In Gamma the language become richer with the virtuoso rhyming and punning of this discussion of art. "to haunt/the unhaunted and the undaunted" and the triple level play of the phrase "do to do" are fascinating. By "do to do" we are to understand the southern rural pronunciation of door to door, an allusion to Henley's "Invictus" a poem to which Tolson will return and a symbol of the full extent of the octave or of reality. The question raised in the section is again the union of extremes - the dead sea of the past and the promised land of the future, the Plain of Shinar apostates and the apostles of art. The section ends on a note of praise for sodom and paradise.

The theater imagery of Gamma is continued in Delta. In the former section experience downstaged head, heart and soul. Here the artist and the age are struggling for downstage position. Tolson can slip you into the dozens (bald as a pilled head of garlic), use homely folk references (a hurrah's nest), introduce musical references (F sharp trumpet, High C), rework familiar myths (Delilah of Délice or a Xanthippe without), play with familiar sayings (of the soul and by the soul) refer to important works of Black literature (To Make a Poet Black), work his metaphor for all it is worth (Balsam apples, cider, malic acid) and finally sound on his enemies (Gertrude Stein becomes the seeress Nix under whose Lesbian rule we suffer).

Epsilon closes the opening discursive unit of the poem with an examination of the "Idols of the Tribe" those powerful men who demand that the artist perform for the race; that he present only that which is flattering to the group. They become the Bulls of Bashan, bull crocodiles, Lords of the House of Flies while the

artist is an Ishmael driven away from the comforts of home.

O bulls of Bashan,
a nod from you is worse than a brief
from Diable Boiteux 35

The artist however presents not what the age demands but like Rembrandt and Milton gives

dramatis personae of the ethos
miracled to fool
the hubris of the tribe.34

The effect of the bulls is to blind as we see from the allusion to "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes". The line "Now laughing friends deride/Tears I cannot hide" becomes "as laughing Dogs confide." The proper response to these Toby Belches and Ichabods is to weep and in describing this, Tolson paraphrases two lines from Psalm 137.

By the waters of Babylon we sit down and weep.
We hang our harps upon the willows. 36

In spite of the bulls, dogs, Lords of the Flies, Belshazzars, Belches and Ichabods

Art's
yen to beard in the den
deep down under root and stone
fossick gold and fossil ivory
stands out
like a whale's
backbone. 36

The melting down attempted in Gamma does not work. Only the fat and meat become part of the American melting pot. Art, the backbone, does not melt down.

John Laugart's painting "Black Bourgeoisie" is discovered in Zeta. The reader immediately calls to mind the Frazier book of the same title that so scandalized the Black establishment. Frazier dealt with what he saw as the sterility and lack of culture of the Black middle class. He attributed this to their having imitated the genteel white tradition and rejected their own cultural roots in the vain hope of acceptance. The title to this book like Dusk of Dawn, Black Boy and Dark Laughter is a recurrent reference in Tolson's poem. As important, and also introduced here, are references to Thomas Hardy's "Terrible Sonnets" - Hap, Tyche and the purblind doomsters reoccur throughout the poem.

COOK 11/76

A fish of passage,
by hook unseen or crook unheard?
the mug of a male umbrella bird,
haply black and mute. 39

The above passage beautifully illustrates the density of Tolson's line. Line one plays on the "bird of passage" symbol of mortality. But here we have not a bird but a fish-an easy victim. Laugart's refusal to succeed by hook or crook gives rise to the second line with its echo of the lines from Gray's "Elegy". The line carries a double meaning - it is a statement of defiance and an admission of failure. His face is likened in the third line to the umbrella bird but the sounding here is affectionate and he is haply (happily? by chance? Tolson will play with both meanings) black and mute. The last words like a similar passage in Ellison's Invisible Man echo the song "What Did I do to Be So Black and Blue". Laugart does not read the curator's mind. Rather, he "measured my interior." The regents of the Harlem Gallery - bulls of Bashan - are sounded on over and over in this section. They are as eyeless as knitting needles. They suffer the carbon monoxide of ignorance and leave the curator's budget as the "corpse of a chance." Again Tolson demands that we recall a song - "IDon't Stand a Ghost of a Chance With You." Their laughter

derisive ha-has of the half-alive
may gird the loins of the soul,
or rive
the ribs of the mind. 40

Only ironic detachment can save the artist from them. For sometimes irony, like English on a pool ball can "bend back the cues." and just as a reflexive verb wil turn the action on the actor , irony

gives the Gomorrhean blues
to the bulls of Bashan
that loose the full
butt of the bull
of blurb. 40

The humor of the passage is apparent if the reader keeps in mind a street meaning of the word "butt" only one of many which is operating in this passage. A loose butted person is one with diarrhea. A loose butted woman is always prone to say yes and as a result is also a possible carrier of gonorrhea. The butt is the buttocks

(See Langston Hughes" "Dear Dr. Butts"letter) and the bull of blurb released here is not only the journalistic bullshit which condemns the nonconforming artist but is also literally diarrhetic bullshit. In spite of this, the true artist resists; he does not follow what is current in "standard" Black rhetoric or action. He is not concerned

as to what shade of Black
the villain Ultra should wear.[41]

He will not "sell/mohair for alpaca/to ring the bell."[41]

To complete the introduction of the major characters and themes and to complete this paper which waxes long (once a reader is provided with a few clues, he should have no trouble with the rest of the poem) we turn to the Eta and Xi sections of the poem. The language in Eta and in the group of poems for which Xi is the climax is, as a result of these sections being set in Aunt Grindle's Elite Chitterling Shop and the Zulu Club, the richest in street expressions of all the sections in the poem. As Eta opens, we hear "a dinoceras of a jukebox" wailing "from everlasting to everlasting" the ironic blues song "Come Back Baby." Doctor Nkomo in response to Guy Delaporte III's question "What manner of man is this?" uses the parable of the chicken and the eagle to sound on Delaporte, ends by signifying that Delaporte is the one with an identity problem and after insulting the man, he turns to shucking and jiving.

I've called the gentleman a liar
- it's true -
and I'm sorry for it.[52]

What is true? That the gentleman is a liar or that he called him one? What is he sorry for? That he called the gentleman a liar or that the gentleman is a liar?

The embrance of Dipsy Muse's wife (remember Clarence Muse and his emasculating movie wives?) is a fine example of Tolson's ability to wring every possible ounce of value from a metaphor. He begins with an allusion to Johnson's "The Creation" and then carries the statement"she blew her top" to its logical? conclusion.

COOK 12/76

Black as a cypress lawn,
the crag of a woman crabsidled in.
The breath of fraxinella in hot weather,
her unlooked-for grin
evaporated; then,
like a well's spew
of mud and oil and raw gas,
she blew
her top. 46

The reaction of the diners and dancers to this scene is described in a similarly way-out manner.

The
stem and stern
of the Elite Chitterling Shop
pitched and ditched
in the chatter and squawks, in the clatter and guffaws,
as a
Yarmouth yawl yaws
when struck by a rogue-elephant sea.47

The music changes to "Black Widow Spider Blues" and the incident is closed by a proverb from Dr. Nkomo.

The debate over the proper role of Afro-Americans which takes place between Dr. Nkomo, Delaporte and the "giraffine fellow" is filled with plays on familiar phrases

all his eggs in the whiteman's basket but one

readied a hobby with
another color for a ride beyond the Afrikaner's stance

It's not this buckle
head's right or wrong
If he does right or wrong

twelve great fatigues to the Promised Land

literary references

a Scarlet Sister Mary on the make,
her lips dark and juicy like a half-done T-bone steak.

boned and fleshed to wear the mask.

The dream of Abraham's bosom bottled long ago.

from vile-canaille balconies and nigger heavens, seen
day beasts and night beasts of prey
in the disemboweling pits of
Europe and America

the double entendre of Nkomo's parable of the loss of manhood

In the wing lock

of habit, it tumbled in disgrace
...down...down...down...
a ghostified cock

eagles dying of munger with cocks in their claws

and virtuoso rhyming , word play and sounding

wealth of the fettered
illth of the lettered

A giraffine fellow whose yellow skin
Mocked the netted pattern of a cantaloupe

He was but a squeaking Cleopatra boy

A rubbernecked Robin Hood in a Morris dance

vane on the wing
to winnow the grain
in person, place and thing.

Xi climaxes the sections of the poem that focus on Hideho Heights and the Zulu Club. His very name is borrowed from the refrain to Cab Calloway's "Minnie The Moocher" for he is the street poet, the man of the people, the puncturer of inflated egos and destroyer of phony gentility. In the Lambda section he breaks into the genteel atmosphere of the Harlem Gallery much to the relief of the curator and in opposition to Professor Freez Sherrit's"Ah Sweet Mystery of Life" he recites his poem to Louis Armstrong. He introduces himself with a brief monika in which he sounds on the failed promise of the American Communist party.

Sorry, Curator, I got here late:
my black ma birthed me in the white's bottom drawer,
and the Reds forgot to fish me out.[46]

"In the beginning was the word" he states and takes the Curator out of the sterile discussion of the Regents of the Harlem Gallery into the excitement and Rabelaisian joy of the Zulu Club where

The toothpick, Funky Five, and Tippling Tom!
Ma Rainey, Countess Willie V., and Aunt Harriet!
Speckled Red, Skinny Head Pete, and Stormy Weather[47]

reigned and showed up the assertion of the "high priestess at Rue de Fleurus" for the nonsense that it was. As Hideho gets ready to recite"The birth of John

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Henry", the silence which greets him is "succulent as the leaves of a fat hen." He is like Paul Robeson "Who sang blue spirituals that turned/Some white folks white, some pink and others red". The colors here refer,as they always do,both to shock and embarassment and to political positions. Hideho is also a Yeats and a Wovoka - a poet who attempts to lift himself and his people from the ugly reality in which they are wallowing by the force of his transcendent dream. He is "a charcoal Piute Messiah/at a ghetto/Ghost Dance." "The poet is no Crusoe in the Zulu Club"; "the poet and the audience one/each bears itself to please." His subject, John Henry whom Tolson calls the Beowulf of Afro-America is one of a host of "bad niggers" who are the subject of toasts and ballads. Because he and his story are so familiar, the presentation is a mutual effort of poet and audience. The call and response pattern is very much in evidence here. Even Dipsy Muse and his wife are passionately reunited by this moment.

"Great God A'mighty!"
cried Dipsy Muse,
as his arm went halfway round
the calf's-foot
jelly mound
of the Xanthippean spouse
whom the whim
of Tyche
had created in the image
of Fatso Darden.[80]

As Hideho takes a drink that would "make a squirrel spit in the eye of a bulldog" the people are treated to an experience that is "a poet's feast in a people's dusk of dawn." It is as "hot as an ache in a cold hand warmed." The cats, the black cats, are gone!"

I was born in Bitchville, Lousyana.
A son of Ham, I had to scram!
I was born in Bitchville, Lousyana;
So I ain't worth a T.B, damn! [83]
.....
I came to Lenox Avenue.
Poor boy Blue! Poor Boy Blue!
I came to Lenox Avenue,
but I find up here a Bitchville too![84]

This toughness in the face of adversity is representative of the heroes of Black ballads and toasts. Notice the following folk toast about Stackolee.

Come here all you whores, and don't you pout
Cause I'm a peter-pushing papa, and a water trout.
i measures thirty-six inches across the chest,
And I don't borrow* nothing but sickness and death.
I've got a tombstone disposition and a graveyard mind,
I'm one motherfucker that don't mind dying.[23]

Hideho's recitation inspires Joshua Nitze, ex-professor of philosophy, to tell a joke on the worthlessness of integrations as it seems to be occurring in America. The joke has gone the rounds of a number of entertainers (I remember Moms Mabley and Redd Foxx using it) but Tolson's treatment refreshes it.

Gabriel hadn't high-Ced his horn
nor the Africans invaded from Mars.

The ofay waitress smiled a blond dolichocephalic smile. [85]

Lionel Matheus the sea wolf of Harlem, follows this with one of his own - a put down of the educated elite who do the shuffle in cultivated English but do the shuffles all the same and Vicent Aveline affectionately sounds on the curator while making a play on the similarity of the words Pithias and pissy ass.

"Damon", he jives,
"Your Pithias needs a Zulu Chief." [86]

To understand the sources of Tolson's language and his references is one thing. To be able to reproduce the sound which he requires is another. Anyone who has ever heard Tolson read recognizes the influence of jazz and hip speech on the sound of his poetry. To fully appreciate this, one has only to open to any page of Harlem Gallery and observe the way in which the poem has been arranged for reading.

Eyes bright as the light
at Eddystone Rock,
an ebony Panthesilea
grabbed her tiger's-eye yellow-brown
beanpole Sir Testiculus of the evening
and gave him an Amazonian hug.
He wilted in her arms
like a limp morning-glory.[74]

Both Flasch in her study and Tolson in his interview with King point out the reasons for the line arrangements which appear in Harlem Gallery. Tolson breaks

* The recorder has misunderstood this word. The speaker means "bar" to back off from or avoid contact with. He adds a syllable to it to complete his rhythm. Recorded examples of Black street language are filled with such stupid errors.

his line according to grammatical principals. Nouns, verbs, clauses, phrases etc. are set off in separate lines forcing the reader to adopt the halts and leaps which characterize hipster speech. One cannot read the poem without being caught up in its rhythms.

I confess without regret
in this omega of my education:
I no longer have the force of a Gilbert,
not have I ever had the levitation
to sustain a work of art.
I have only pilgrimed
to the cross street
(a godsend in God's acre)
where
curator and creator
meet
friend yoked to friend at the candle end.[170]

****

this allegro of the Harlem Gallery
is not a chippy fire
for here, in focus, are paintings that chronicle
a people's New World odyssey
from chattel to Esquire! [173]

There is a great deal still to be done with this work and ending a discussion of it involves a great deal of frustration and a sense of a task that is only begun. So much of the biographical, historical and aesthetic information remains to be explicated. But since this discussion of language did not purport to be anything but a beginning and since Tolson has already told us to take it light on the bio bit, I'll cool it and get in the wind with a closing rap from the man himself.

Now you know it's not the poet's life that's important.
It's the work...you'll find the man in the work anyway...
Analyze his writing carefully and you'll have him. There's
where you'll find the distilled essence of the man.[24]

A reader who wishes to study the verbal strategies mentioned in this paper should consult the following works:

Abrahams, Roger	Deep Down in the Jungle
Awonoor, Kofi	The Breast of the Earth
Jackson, Bruce	Get Yo' Ass in the Water and Swim Like Me, In the Life
Kochman, Thomas	Rappin' and Stylin' Out
Milner, Christina and Richard	Black Players
Rainwater, Lee	Behind Ghetto Walls, Soul

Fiction, autobiography and poetry that is especially rich in examples includes the following:

Baraka, Imamu Amiri	Race Rays Raze, In our Terribleness, Black Magic
Bullins, Ed	The Fabulous Miss Marie, In the Wine Time, The Corner
Brown, Claude	Manchild in the Promised Land
Brown, H. Rap	Die, Nigger, Die!
Ellison, Ralph W.	Invisible Man, Shadow and Act
Dumas, Henry	Play Ebony, Play Ivory
Harrison, Paul C.	The Great McDaddy
Hughes, Langston	Collected Poems
Iceberg Slim	Pimp
Joans, Ted	Aphrodisia, Black Pow-Wow
Marcelin, Pierre	All Men Are Mad, The Beast From the Haitian Hills
Madbhuti, Haki	Don't Cry, Scream, We Walk the Way of the New World
Reed, Ishmael	The Freelance Pallbearers, Yellowbak Radio Broke down, Mumbo-Jumbo, Flight to Canada, The Last Days of Louisiana Red, Chatanooga
Young, Al	Sitting Pretty
Van Peebles, Melvin	Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death, Don't Play Us Chepp, A Bear for the F.B.I.

NOTES

1. Robert Donald Spector, "The Poet's Voice in the Crowd," Saturday Review of Literature, 7 March 1965, p. 29.

2. Karl Shapiro, "The Decolonization of American Literature," Negro Digest, October, 1965, pp. 69-70.

3. Ibid. p. 70.

4. Melvin Beaunorus Tolson, "Claude McKay's Art," Poetry, XXCIII (February, 1950, pp. 288-9.

5. William Rose Benet, "Two Powerful Negro Poets," Saturday Review of Literature, 28 March 1945, pp. 35 and 37.

6. Karl Shapiro, "Introduction to Harlem Gallery," Harlem Gallery, Twayne, N.Y., 1965, p. 13.

7. Robert D. Spector, op. cit.

8. John Ciardi, "Recent Verse," The Nation, 27 February 1954, p. 183.

9. Sarah Webster Fabio, "Who Speaks Negro?" Negro Digest, XVI, 2 (December, 1966), p. 58.

10. Paul Bremen, "Poetry Into the Sixties" The Black American Writer: Poetry and Drama, II. Ed. C.W.E.Bigsby. Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969, p.101.

11. Dudley Randall, "The Black Aesthetic in the Thirties, Forties and Fifties," The Black Aesthetic, Ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. New York: Doubleday, 1961, p. 218.

12. Jack Richardson, "The Black Arts," The New York Review of Books, XI, 2 (December 19, 1968), p. 10.

13. "A New Light on the Invisible," Anon. Rev., Times Literary Supplement, 25 November 1965, p. 1049.

14. Melvin B. Tolson, "A Poet's Odssey," Anger and Beyond. Ed. Herbert Hill. New York: Harper and Row, 1966, p. 184.

15. Melvin B. Tolson Op. cit., p. 192.

16. Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man. New York: Vintage Books, 1972, p.268.

17. Ralph Ellison, op. cit., p. 197.

18. Melvin B. Tolson, op. cit. p. 195.

19. Ibid., p. 184.

20. Ralph Ellison, op. cit., p.439.